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Elgin-O'Hare work accelerating at last — with tolls

By Marni Pyke

An estimated 65,000 jobs by 2040. Economic development for DuPage and northwest Cook counties. Access into O'Hare International Airport from the west. And, tolls of 20 cents per mile on what was previously a freeway.

A lot of changes are coming for the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway after the U.S. Department of Transportation Wednesday signed off on a final agreement that allows the Illinois tollway to extend the highway east to the airport and build a ring road connecting to the Tri-State (I-294) and Jane Addams (I-90) tollways.

The formalization of what had been expected to happen for months means the start of construction, which will be paid for with tolls on the new section and the existing portion of the Elgin-O'Hare — nicknamed the "IHOP Expressway" because now it stretches only from Itasca to Hanover Park.

The expressway will travel along Thorndale Avenue into O'Hare, and the ring road, known as the western bypass, will connect with the Elgin-O'Hare in the middle, plus link to the Tri-State in Franklin Park and the Jane Addams in Des Plaines.

One reason tolls can be charged on the existing section of the expressway is that the tollway will make improvements to it, including interchanges.

Less certain is what travelers can expect when they get to O'Hare from the west. A much-anticipated western terminal was shelved after opposition from American and United Airlines. Chicago Department of Aviation officials have stated that a parking facility will be available and some type of transport to terminals.

"This has been a long time coming," tollway Executive Director Kristi Lafleur said Thursday. "It's one of many milestones."

The project, originally undertaken by the Illinois Department of Transportation, has been years in the making. Initial opposition from neighboring towns and IDOT's lack of funds made progress problematic.

Here are some details on the project, estimated to cost \$3.4 billion:

• The tollway will kick in \$3.1 billion and the surrounding communities are expected to contribute the remaining \$300 million, potentially through federal grants, DuPage County Chairman Dan Cronin said previously.

• New interchanges on the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway will include Park Boulevard and Arlington Heights Road in Itasca, Wood Dale Road in Wood Dale, and Route 83 in Bensenville.

• New interchanges on the bypass will include Higgins Road (Route 72) in Elk Grove Village, Irving Park Road in Bensenville, and an interconnected system at the nexus of Taft Avenue, County Farm Road and Green Street/Franklin Avenue in Franklin Park.

• Planners intend to create a full interchange at I-90 and Elmhurst Road and to improve the problematic I-294

connection with eastbound North Avenue in Elmhurst as part of the work.

• Toll rates on the expressway and extension will be about 20 cents a mile.

• Completing the project could require up to 596 acres, including seven homes and 52 businesses, although those numbers could decrease.

Tollway officials Thursday authorized staff engineers to start acquiring land for the Elmhurst Road interchange. The property is needed for both widening of the Jane Addams as well as the expressway.

“Work is scheduled to begin by the end of 2013 and be complete in 2016,” tollway spokeswoman Wendy Abrams said. “The improvements will begin with the construction of a new bridge structure to carry southbound Elmhurst Road traffic over I-90.”